



The Spiritual Father and the Spiritual Child: Love and Freedom, or Domination and Dependence?

An address by His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi,
delivered at the Second Clergy-Laity Gathering,
November 2/15, 2012

*Reverend Fathers and Mothers,
Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Children in the Lord:*

A. Preface

I call upon the prayers of our much-revered Elder, Guide, and Father, Metropolitan Cyprian, as well as the strengthening and guidance of our Mother, the *Theotokos*, and also your own prayers, that I might deal—almost pithily—with only the most basic points of the multifaceted subject, “The Spiritual Father and the Spiritual Child: Love and Freedom, or Domination and Dependence?”



In essence, I will not set forth anything original here; that is, I will not present a complete, albeit brief, treatise on the subject. I will simply endeavor to codify things that are already known to you, and in particular, in the light of my humble experience as a confessor and spiritual Father of both laypeople and monastics.

I must admit from the outset that what prompted me to discuss this topic was not the assuredly pleasant side of the relationship between spiritual Father and spiritual child, but rather the unpleasant side—the so-called “pathology of spiritual Fatherhood.”

I have ascertained and recorded the dangers entailed in this reciprocal relationship, and I wish, within the scope of my pastoral responsibility and in a clear manner, to draw to the attention of both the spiritual Father and the spiritual child that this relationship in the Holy Spirit should remain just what it always has been: namely, a *ministry of reconciliation between man and God*.

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B. General Context

1. We are witnesses to the great danger of this charism—this “ministry of reconciliation”—being distorted to such an extent that the spiritual Father demeans himself into becoming a guide to *merely outward behavior* and a “rule-keeper”; that is, a *guardian and defender of canonical and legal ordinances*, a *ruler and despot*, who ultimately brings about the destruction of his spiritual child, a person created in the image of God.



2. Authentic Orthodox Tradition, on the other hand, has endowed spiritual Fatherhood with an *ecclesiological character*; the Bishop, as a “type of the Father,” followed by the Priests, and after that the Abbas, Elders, and *Startsi*, and also the spiritual Mothers, or Ammas, have all received a particular charism: *the charism of spiritual Fatherhood or Motherhood*; that is, through the Gospel they “give birth” to spiritual children—who are not theirs, but God’s—and experience the “travail” of a preternatural childbearing, “until Christ be formed” in their hearts.

3. This charism, though cultivated, to be sure, within the canonical boundaries of the Church, is the result of a mystical “ordination” within the charismatic realm of the Church—that mysteriological realm, that is, wherein Divine Grace is *conceived, gestates, and is born* in the heart of the spiritual child.

4. In other words, in Orthodoxy, we have a *liturgical Fatherhood*, which is bound up with the Priesthood; but we also have a *charismatic Fatherhood and Motherhood*, which is an exceptional gift of the Divine Comforter. These two kinds of Fatherhood can coincide, and our address today deals first and foremost with this concurrence.

5. Within the charismatic realm of “spiritual childbearing,” the spiri-

tual Father performs the lofty ministry of being, among other things, a *mystagogue*, “*bridal escort*,” *physician*, *therapist*, *minister*, and *co-worker* in the journey of his spiritual child towards deification, or Christification.

6. The Father’s “spiritual travail” is unswervingly directed towards one end: to guide his spiritual child to maturity and emancipation in Christ, that is, to freedom in the Holy Spirit.

7. This mysteriological relationship involves the meeting and communion of two persons in love and freedom, always focusing upon the Theandric Person of Christ; that is to say, both remain in obedience to the Church and to God.

• I would remind you of the pertinent teaching of St. John Chrysostomos:

In human terms, there is a distinction between sheep and Shepherds, but in relation to Christ all are sheep; for those who shepherd and those who are shepherded are pastured by one Shepherd on high.



8. In order for spiritual Father and spiritual child to become whole and complete persons in Christ, they must both constantly strive to focus on the Person of Christ. In the relationship between them, there is no place for *domination or dependence*, *coercion or obedience as an end in itself*, *punishment for the sake of “atonement” or practicing one’s faith as a mere set of religious rules*, *transference of responsibility*, or *pathological self-abnegation*. Rather, in this relationship there is room only for love and freedom.

9. This endeavor, as you have by now understood, is fraught with dangers on both sides. That is, there is a possibility that, whether out of ignorance, immaturity, or human weakness, the spiritual Father might harm his spiritual child, and *vice versa*.

• In such cases, spiritual Fatherhood and spiritual sonship cease being authentic and consequently have destructive effects on either one side or the other, or on both sides at the same time.

10. Hence, I deem it necessary to stress several *specific points* for the protection of both sides. I would like to make it clear, however, that first and foremost I am addressing spiritual Fathers who serve those

outside of a monastic setting, namely, laypeople.

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C. Specific Points



1. Christian love for one’s spiritual Father is a *spiritual matter*; it is a mystery, wherein we have a communion of persons—not a sentimental, psychological, or merely rational communion, but an existential one.

2. The love and obedience of a spiritual child to his or her spiritual Father, as an expression of gratitude and respect, does not constitute a *cult of personality* or a “*dependent personality disorder*,” but rather an exodus from the prison of an unhealed mind and of self-love, *towards a meeting and mutual circumincession* of the two persons amid the Uncreated Light of the Holy Trinity.

3. Love and respect for one’s spiritual Father are *elevating and ontological in character*. That is, the spiritual child, as an image of God, is elevated by his spiritual Father to his Prototype, the Uncreated Image of God, which is Christ Himself; hence, in loving and honoring our spiritual Father, we love and render honor to Christ.

4. The spiritual Father is *in the type and place of the presence of Christ*; that is, Christ acts in the spiritual Father, and through him Christ is *made present*. Hence, love for our spiritual Father is love for Christ our Savior, Who is present through him.

5. Nothing but obedience—in a spirit of love, freedom, respect, and faith—to our spiritual Father combats self-assurance and tyrannical self-love, imparts the Grace and blessing of the Holy Trinity, and leads the spiritual child to contemplation of the Uncreated Light.

6. The spiritual Father must also have his own spiritual Father, since his own personal spiritual “birth” must come first, and only then the spiritual “birth” of his spiritual children.

7. The spiritual child should not confuse a loving, spiritual relationship in Christ with his spiritual Father on the one hand, with *idealization*—i.e., practically *mythologizing* his spiritual Father as a sort of ideal—on the other. The spiritual Father is also a human being with weaknesses, and when his spiritual child, upon perceiving such failings,

encounters them with genuine love, in a constructive and edifying way, he is protected from (spiritual) disillusionment and collapse.

8. The spiritual child should not seek “over-protection” in the form of a “super-dad,” on whom he would place all of his responsibilities by way of *unhealthy submission*, blind obedience, and *psychological dependence*. Rather, he should seek to experience the *Mystery of spiritual Fatherhood and sonship*, so as to be led from the level of a *slave* to the freedom of the children of God—to *spiritual adoption*.

9. The spiritual Father should fear lest he *distort the integrity of the person* of his spiritual child by transforming his office of ministration into one of *domination*—and absolute domination at that—thereby becoming a *director of consciences* and creating *followers* instead of spiritual children.

10. A spiritual Father “*gives birth*” in *Christ* to a child, assists him in cultivating the charism of *wisdom and attentiveness*, and supports and heartens him, until he *comes of age*, such that his spiritual child might thereafter live out his freedom in a spirit of love, making responsible use of the talents and charisms given to him by God.

11. The spiritual Father should not encourage *unwholesome—or, in any event, excessive—expressions of devotion* to his person (e.g. servile prostrations, prolonged hand-kissing, the asking of blessings for trivial matters, etc.), since in this way he is in danger of being assailed by the *spiritual sickness* of narcissism and anthropocentric Eldership.

12. Likewise, he must not cultivate the deadly sickness of a cult-like following, wherein, veiled under unhealthy ties of obedience, lie timidity, cowardice, insecurity, irresponsibility, and fanaticism on the part of the spiritual child, such that the spiritual Father, manipulating these weaknesses, indiscriminately intrudes into all of the aspects of his spiritual child’s personal, family, and social life.

13. The spiritual Father does not *supersede the thoughts and mind* of his spiritual child, but rather *acts therapeutically*: he turns his spiritual child’s thoughts and mind toward God, such that, by means of the Mysteries and the keeping of the commandments, these might be healed, illumined, and deified, so as to be rightly oriented in freedom.

14. The spiritual Father must not forget that *obedience is not an end in itself*, but a *means and a spiritual tool*, which, when employed Chris-



tocentrally and not anthropocentrically, leads his spiritual child to maturity and freedom, and not to being an automaton or robot.

15. The spiritual Father sins gravely when he indirectly or directly encourages a *pathological dependence on himself and crushingly oppresses his spiritual child's conscience in the name of blind obedience*, which is supposedly due to his person; whereas Christ asks of us only a conscientious obedience, in love and

freedom.

16. The spiritual Father is not a despot and steamroller seeking to create faithful replicas of himself; rather, he encourages the development of his spiritual child's personhood and gifts, such that the latter might be able to take hold of the helm of his life in a responsible manner.

17. Under no circumstances whatsoever should the boundaries be confused between monastic obedience to an Elder and a layperson's obedience to his spiritual Father; for there is a profound mysteriological difference between these two forms of obedience: the monastic, on the one hand, has committed himself to a very particular form of obedience, absolute in nature, through vows, and with a definite purpose; the layperson, on the other hand, has committed himself to a general form of "obedience to Christ" through Baptism and Chrismation.

18. The bond that joins the spiritual Father and spiritual child is a *bond of mutual love in Christ*, which must be constantly purged of all *emotional exaltation* and shielded on both sides from anything that might conceal passion, in both the broad and narrow senses of the word, such that this bond might develop in an atmosphere of modesty and simplicity, solemnity and sobriety, and *intimacy* and *reserve*.

D. Concluding thoughts and exhortations

1. Hence, let both spiritual Father and spiritual child take care lest their blessed relationship develop into one of *psychological dependency*. It is very important that the spiritual Father motivate his spiritual child to *bring every thought and movement of his being into "submission to Christ,"* because only thereby will he be cured and reborn in love and freedom.

2. Let the spiritual Father take care lest he give the impression that he himself constitutes a sort of *ideological or psychological refuge*, where his anxious, agitated, and frightened spiritual child might find relief of a transient and superficial nature. Rather, he must take pains to make clear and emphatic the distinction between freedom that derives from the Holy Spirit and the *self-imposed hell of self-love*, and to promote a sense of responsibility and a “holy” boldness and persistence in the cultivation of spiritual charisms—and all of this, to be sure, having in view our “meeting” with the Person of Christ.

3. Let the spiritual Father take care not to forget that he, first, as a “Minister of Jesus Christ,” is *subservient to the Church*; hence, he does not embody a sort of domination over his spiritual child. He thus ought to act with complete self-denial by his submission to the preëminent and only true spiritual guide of the Church, which is the Holy Spirit.

4. Let the spiritual Father take care always to have as a rule of action the exhortation of the great Elder, St. Barsanouphios (Reply 35):

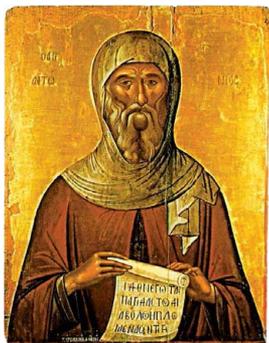
Do not force [your spiritual child’s] will, but rather sow hope; for our Lord did not coerce anyone, but spread the Gospel, and whoever so desired listened.



5. Let the spiritual Father take care not to “*appropriate*” his spiritual child; rather, if the latter progresses in the spiritual life and becomes in need of something higher, which the former is not able to offer him, then this spiritual Father, with love and humility, should lead him to a more experienced spiritual Father—a better “physician” or “therapist.”

6. Let the spiritual child, in turn, also take care not to content himself with the real or putative holiness of his spiritual Father, boasting about this and remaining carefree; rather, he should strive, with zeal, to the best of his ability [in the spiritual life], since neither God nor his spiritual Father will save him, if he does not practice his freedom in a responsible manner.

• A monk once visited St. Anthony the Great and asked him to pray for him. The Saint replied: “**Neither do I have mercy on you nor does God, if you yourself do not make haste to beseech God.**”



7. Let the faithful in general take care not to change from one spiritual Father to another, in an attempt—usually in vain—to discover a spiritual Father of “extraordinary holiness,” who would supposedly take upon himself all responsibility and immediately and miraculously resolve all of their problems; for, by means of a simple spiritual Father who has fear of God, it is possible for the faithful—while banishing all self-justification—to activate Divine zeal, overcome their self-love, sacrifice themselves on behalf of their neighbor, and to become true “Persons,” in love and freedom, amidst the ineffable radiance of the Holy Trinity, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

I thank you!

†Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi,
November 2/15, 2012,
Acharnai, Athens

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**Unto Him Who bestows
every good gift,
God, the Lover of mankind,
be glory and thanksgiving,
now and ever!**